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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the use of dialogue journals for developing the language and literacy skills of students of all ages learning English a Second Language. Dialogue journals are written conversations in which students and teachers communicate on a regular basis. Students write as much as they choose, and the teacher writes back, responding to questions, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The idea is to encourage students to use written English and not to focus on error correction. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Dialogue journals are now being used in a range of educational settings--with children and adults, with both native and nonnative English speakers, and in teacher and volunteer training programs. Sample dialogue journal entries are provided, as well as general information on the benefits and logistics of using dialogue journals. (VWL)

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ERIC Digest

Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy

Prepared by Joy Peyton

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

April 1993

Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy (EDO-FL-93-01)

Prepared by Joy Kreeft Peyton, National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

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Teachers of both children and adults often wish they had more time to communicate with their students—to learn about their backgrounds, interests, and needs; to share information; and to follow their learning. The need to communicate is intensified with students learning English as a second language (ESL), who bring to the classroom a different language and cultural background. These students may also be non- or semi-literate in their native language, have had little or no schooling in their country, and have possibly suffered considerable trauma as they left their native country to come to the United States. If they are new arrivals to the United States, they are adjusting to an entirely new way of life at the same time that they are learning a new language and beginning to function in a school or work setting. It is with these students that one-to-one communication is crucial—not only to help them adjust, but also to help the teacher understand them and address their particular language and literacy needs.

Many teachers of such students have found *dialogue journals*, interactive writing on an individual basis, to be a crucial part of their classes. Dialogue journals not only open a new channel of communication, but they also provide another context for language and literacy development. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Because the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing.

What Is a Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting) over a semester, school year, or course. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing.

The first documented use of dialogue journals was with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers, in California (Peyton & Staton, 1993). They are now being used in a range of educational settings–with children and adults, with both native and nonnative English speakers, and in teacher and volunteer training programs.

The following example, excerpted with permission from the dialogue journal entries of teacher Leslee Reed and Claudia, a sixth grade student from El Salvador, illustrates the nature of the writing (from Peyton & Reed, 1990).

March 17

Claudia: *The new teacher of helper in our class is very good. I like her, don't you like her? Today she helped me and us a lot. But Tony didn't want help. Why doesn't Tony want us to help him?*

I will try & bring my lunch every day from now on because the turkey stew & other lunches put me sick. I hate them. When I am very hungry I have to eat them but when I get to my house my stomach hurts & I am sick for 3 days. Can't the teachers protest or say something about the food that they give here?

What do youfeed chickens here? We have a hen that layd an egg.

Teacher: *The lunches are not that bad! I've eaten them sometimes. You are wise to bring your own lunch. That is usually what I do too. You have such good food at home that nothing served here could taste so good!*

Tony is embarrassed. He wants help, but he does not want anyone to know that he needs it. Offer to help him and if he says "no" then leave him alone.

Chickens will eat scraps of bread, wheat, seeds, water and some insects.

March 18

Claudia: *but the hen has wat it looks like worms, do you know how to get the hen of her stomach sickness or is it usual for her to be like that because she is laying eggs and she could even lay 30 eggs so I do not know if it is usual or if it is a sickness of her. oh poor hen she cooks & cooks when I say pretty hen in a low voice & she looks like she is used to children because she is cook & cooking when I say pretty things, oh she's so nice.*

Teacher: *I've never heard of a hen having worms--but it is possible. Go to a pet shop or to a veterinarian and ask them. Who gave you the hen? Maybe they will know. We say that a hen clucks. It is a pleasant little sound as though they are happy. They cackle when they lay an egg! That is usually loud! Does your hen cackle? I think hens like having people or other hens around, don't you?*

In dialogue journals, students can write about topics that are important to them in the written genre that is appropriate. They are not constrained by teacher- or curriculum-established topics or by a pre-set schedule of topics and genres that must be covered in sequence. Sometimes their concerns and interests are personal. Adults may write about family or personal identity issues. Likewise, journal entries may relate to academic or work-related issues. (See Atwell, 1987, for discussion of the use of literature-focused journals.) Students may write descriptions, narratives, complaints, or arguments with supporting details, as the topic and communicative purpose dictate.

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Because the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the student, his or her writing is roughly tuned to the student's language proficiency level. In most cases, teachers do not overtly correct errors. This is one place where students may write freely, without focusing on form. The teacher's response in the journal serves as a model of correct English usage. There are many other opportunities, on more extended assignments, in which teachers and students can focus on correct form. At times, however, students do request correction. See Peyton & Staton (1991) for strategies teachers can use to address students' errors.

With non-literate students, there is no initial pressure to write. Students can begin by drawing pictures, with the teacher drawing pictures in reply, perhaps writing a few words underneath or labeling the pictures. The move to letters, words, and longer texts can be made when students feel ready. Alternatively, students can dictate their entries to the teacher, an aide, or another student who writes them down, writes a reply, and reads it aloud. In classes focusing on native language literacy, the interaction can be conducted in the students' native languages. The move to English can occur in line with course objectives or student readiness.

What Are the Benefits?

Extending contact time with students and getting to know them in a way that may not be possible otherwise. Through the journals, teachers may discuss, for example, the student's native culture and language, problems adjusting to the new culture, school procedures, and personal interests. This information not only builds strong personal ties, but also gives students access to a member of the new language and culture. Through this relationship, the student has regular opportunities to reflect on new experiences and emerging knowledge and to think through with another individual ideas, problems, and important choices.

Management of classes with students of varying language, ability, and interest levels. All students, no matter what their language or literacy level, can participate in the activity to some extent, from the first day of class. Because students' dialogue journal entries give continual feedback about what they understand in class as well as about their language progress, the teacher receives information that can lead to individualized instruction for each student.

Optimal language learning conditions. Dialogue journals focus on meaning rather than form and on real topics and issues of interest to the student. The teacher's written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the student's proficiency level; thus, the teacher's entries can provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher's writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style, and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. As students continue to write and read the teacher's writing, they are likely to develop confidence in their own ability to express themselves in writing. Many teachers using dialogue journals report that their students' writing becomes more fluent, interesting, and correct over time, and that the writing done in dialogue journals can serve as the basis for other writing (McGrail, 1991).

The major drawback that teachers experience is the time required to read and respond to student entries. However, those teachers who have been successful with dialogue journals have worked out ways to manage the process (see Peyton & Staton, 1991) and report that the time is well spent, for the knowledge they gain about students' interests and problems and the feedback they receive about the ongoing work and activities serve as the basis for future planning.

What Are the Logistics?

Materials. Most people use bound, easily transportable (for the teacher carrying a class set) notebooks. Teachers and students in programs with easy access to computers may exchange computer disks or interact through electronic mail.

Frequency of writing. The writing must be done regularly, but the frequency depends on the number of students involved, the length of the class, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and students. Most teachers prefer to give their students time to write during class—at the beginning as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition. The teacher may let the students choose a time for writing their journal entries. Ten to fifteen minutes is usually adequate to read the teacher's entry and write a new one. Teachers usually respond outside class time.

Length of writing. Set a minimum (e.g., three sentences) that students must write. (This may not be appropriate for adults.) Later on, the amount of writing should be up to each student. Students should understand that long, polished pieces are not required.

Writing instructions and topics. Inform students that they will be participating in a continuing, private, written conversation, that they may write on any topic (unless a particular theme has been chosen by the teacher or the class), and that the teacher will write back regularly without correcting errors. The mechanics of when to write, when to turn the journals in, and when they will be returned should also be explained. When students are unable to think of something to write, the teacher might suggest one or two possible topics or hand out a list of suggestions, or the class can brainstorm topics together.

Journal partners do not have to be teachers. Students can write with classroom aides, with each other, or with another class of students who are older or more proficient in English. The teacher or writing partner should enter into the journal interaction as a good conversationalist and an interesting writer (and with adults, as a colleague). The goal is to be responsive to student topics and concerns, to ask questions, to introduce topics, and to write about oneself. Teacher entries that simply echo what the student wrote or that ask a lot of questions can stifle rather than promote interaction.

Finally, relax and enjoy the writing. For many teachers, reading and writing in dialogue journals is one of the best parts of the class—a wonderful time to reflect, to find out about the people with whom they are spending the term or year, and to think together with their students about where their work is taking them.

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